



Self Portrait at the Temple of Athena Nike on the Acropolis
Athens, 1938c, George Everard Kidder Smith

the visual transmission of european architecture by george everard kidder smith

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*George Everard Kidder Smith has taken breath-taking photographs of buildings all around the world for nearly sixty years. He is recognized along with Julius Shulman and Ezra Stoller as one of the leading figures of the twentieth century architectural photography. During his career, he wrote and illustrated with his images a series of books, the first of which was *Brazil Builds* (1943), an examination of the South American modernism produced in collaboration with the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In the early 1940's and in the late 1950's his interest in European architecture became quite evident in a series of volumes that were published in order to describe visually the architectural and historical identity of the three countries which he surveyed: Sweden, Switzerland and Italy. In Europe he had remarkable intuition about how to reveal newly built architecture through beautifully composed images in black and white and subtle shades of grey. His three similar grant-aided volumes, *Sweden Builds*, *Switzerland Builds* (both 1950) and *Italy Builds* (1955), represent an anomaly in architectural photography: he took pictures to illustrate his books as well as lectures he's given worldwide throughout his life, so he didn't depend on architects or magazines for commissions. Later, in the 1960s, Kidder Smith would travel through Europe to research *The New Architecture of Europe* (1961) and *The New Churches of Europe* (1964). He reveals another aspect of his fascination in his introduction to "New Architecture", describing how the advent of such technological innovations as rolled steel and reinforced concrete changed the way people build.*

keywords Architectural history, Photography, Sweden, Italy, Switzerland, XXth Century European architecture

introduction

George Everard Kidder Smith (1913-1997) has taken breath-taking photographs of buildings all around the world for nearly sixty years. He is recognized along with Julius Shulman (1910-2009) and Ezra Stoller (1915-2004) as one of the leading figures of the twentieth century architectural photography. During his career, he wrote and illustrated with his images a series of books, the first of which was *Brazil Builds* (1943), an examination of the South American modernism produced in collaboration with the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In the early 1940's and in the late 1950's his interest in European continental architecture became quite evident in a series of volumes that were published in order to describe visually the architectural and historical identity of the three countries which he surveyed: Sweden, Switzerland and Italy. In Europe he had remarkable intuition about how to reveal newly built architecture through beautifully composed images in black and white and subtle shades of grey. Kidder Smith was intrigued with contemporary architecture and went to Sweden to see examples of the then-new, unadorned, rectangular Modern style. He left Sweden at the start of World War II, but his photographs formed the basis of "Stockholm Builds", a 1941 exhibit at MoMA. The show opened to the general public on 6th of August but it had been sent by the Museum's Department of Circulating Exhibitions to other museums and art galleries throughout the country. Prepared by Elizabeth Bauer Mock (1911-1998) of the Museum's Department of Architecture, who had at the time made a wide study of contemporary building programs and housing developments, the exhibition consisted of fifty-one plywood panels on which were mounted Kidder Smith's photographs and enlargements.



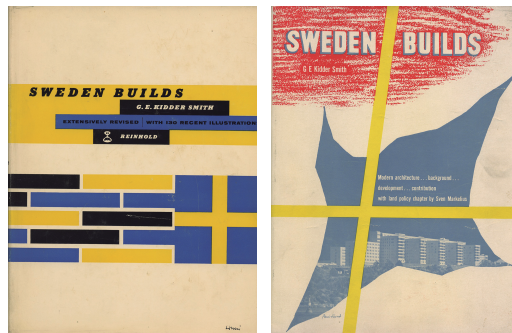
f1_Woodland Crematorium

by Erik Gunnar Asplund, Stockholm, 1941, George Everard Kidder Smith

The photographs, which were described as unusually brilliant architectural records, show apartments, cooperative housing developments, schools, pre-fabricated houses, theatres, a public swimming pool, a biological laboratory, technical museum, and, among the most beautiful buildings, the woodland crematorium by Erik Gunnar Asplund (1885-1940).

swedish northern simplicity revealed

After his service in the U.S. Navy, where his duties included photographing newly build naval installations, Kidder Smith returned to Sweden and completed his research for *Sweden Builds* (1950). He wrote that book with the help of two grants, one a Guggenheim, thus starting a pattern that would run throughout his professional career. These grants gave him an independence that made him an anomaly in architectural photography: he took pictures to illustrate his books as well as lectures he's given worldwide throughout his life, so he didn't depend on architects or magazines for commissions. After the introductory chapters by the photographer and the modernist architect Sven Gottfrid Markelius (1889-1972) the book presents Swedish architecture starting with the architectural inheritance like wood tradition, half-timber construction and stone architecture¹.



f2_The two different covers for G.E. Kidder Smith's *Sweden Builds* (1950)
the first designed by the Leo Lionni and the second one designed by Paul Rand

The main part of the book deals with contemporary architecture focusing for example on housing, hospitals, social welfare buildings, steel and concrete bridges and also on architecture for sports. The book gives a general idea of Swedish architectural style and Kidder Smith deals with every example in a critical way pointing out pros and cons of each building. It is the taken photographic image together with the personal written captions that makes every reader aware of the architectural beauty complex. By doing this he adopts a diversified layout where black and white and colour pictures, sketches, plans and elevations dialogue with interior views, drawn urban settings and outline perspective views. Kidder Smith puts them in a very deliberate order and decides which part gets more space in the layout by its importance. Through the photographic record Kidder Smith emphasises how climate influences people and architecture. Good lighting is a major issue for a photographer, but it is also an important subject during the process of designing for the architect. Being Sweden close to the Arctic Circle the sun never sets during midsummer and there is a lack of winter sun from December until March every year. On one side he points out the cell-like architecture with small windows and on the other hand he looks at the open wide houses where brilliant summer light, clear air and water sparkling with reflections, strongly influenced Sweden's architectural development. According to the author there is a "love and contact with soil and natural surroundings" which is an important part of Swedish architectural history. This European country has many forests reserves and even if its main architectural material is timber, he might have to be considered

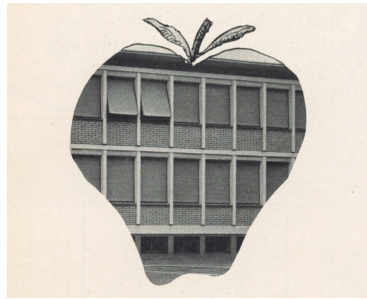
one of the earliest American critics to have noticed that industrialisation was on its way with the introduction of modern materials like steel and glass towards a new standardization of architectural techniques. Therefore Kidder Smith says that Sweden's architecture is based on "purposeful simplicity", "sense of quality" and "feeling for material". The social approach that becomes an aesthetic idea is the leitmotiv of the survey throughout the book. As stated by the architect-photographer many of the buildings captured with camera have a sociological role: the approach of better housing, schools and living conditions are the basis of Swedish attitude. The achieving goal of the illustrated publication is to educate the general public in the appreciation of good design. Sweden architects, as German ones, early recognized the design possibilities of machine made products and established high standards for manufactured construction elements. Another important point on which the author focuses is the influence of other European countries on the Swedish architectural context. He asserts that in Sweden architects developed a "nationalized style" starting from Italian and German design bringing it to the so called "northern simplicity". *Sweden Builds* is not only the work of a practising architect with an architect's discerning eye, but represents an essential volume for all who would like to understand visually and verbally the country. No other authority on modern architecture brought to the task of criticism such ability to describe, analyse and portray.

switzerland optically conquered

The Swiss part of Kidder Smith's work will be summed up in the first edition of *Switzerland builds* published by The Architectural Press and Albert Bonnier in March 1950. It comprises both the beginnings of Swiss native architecture and the works of modern architecture in the mid-twenties. As for the earlier book, research was done by travelling and all pictures were taken by the author himself. To complete his work even the layout was designed by Kidder Smith. The Swiss architectural historian and engineer Siegfried Giedion (1888-1968), who wrote the introductory pages to the book, stated: "A young American architect, educated at Princeton, arrived last year in Zurich with an old convertible and a pile of cameras. Although his fine photographs for *Brazil Builds* had preceded him, we were rather sceptical when he told us that he intended to conquer Switzerland optically within three months. We knew that, in spite of being a very small country, Switzerland is a rather intricate subject. We must confess, however, that our scepticism vanished when we got the proofs of Kidder Smith's work a short time later from New York"². After the introduction, a comparative map of Switzerland and the United States is shown and furthermore an explanation of the canton and language division in Switzerland is given. Generally, the book is separated in two parts: Native Architecture and Modern Architecture. The Native section begins with a retrospect to Swiss history and indicates the challenges it faced. The geographic and ethnic diversity in Switzerland as well as marked regional construction resources have produced widely varied architectural expressions. Each canton offers recognizable building patterns that have evolved from its particular needs and have been realized with its specific resources. The maximum lessons can be drawn from the minimum spaces. In addition to that the use of material both structurally and aesthetically are pointed out. Kidder Smith emphasises that there is a tendency all over the world to break away from the synthetic finish materials and return to the more natural ones. The return to unadorned, unadulterated and magnificently conceived architecture takes place. The examples pictured and shown in the book represent all forms of architecture. Smith's attitude reminds us of the celebrated quote by Mies van der Rohe: "Let us guide our students over the road of discipline from materials, through function, to creative work. Let us lead them into the healthy world of primitive building methods, where there was meaning in every stroke of an axe, expression in every bite of a chisel. Where can we find greater structural clarity than in the wooden buildings of old? Where else can we find such unity of material, construction and form? Here the wisdom of whole generations is stored"³.

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Looking carefully at the publication we discover that French Switzerland houses were planned with a blank, pentagonal end wall facing to counter wind and rain. In the Wallis canton we find multi-storied houses with masonry bases where walls are unpainted and waterproofed by four, five or six-inch thick woods. Kidder Smith also portrays Bern colossal houses with huge roofs and access ramps leading to the granary. We learn that typical farm buildings around Basel include comfortable barns with eaves outstretched against the winter's snows and summer's rains, while in central Switzerland there are many lake-side houses of wealthy owners which develop a different character compared to those of the rest of Switzerland including no farm services. Finally we are led into handsome Grisons region masonry and wood farm buildings and Tessin canton stone constructions which express the most intimate reflections of the mountain setting.



f3. A curious image of the Apple Juice Plant at Eschenz

by Dubois and Eschenmoser architects as it appears in G.E. Kidder Smith's *Switzerland Builds* (1950)

In directing the reader from native to modern architecture, Kidder Smith summarises the ancient basic techniques of construction (stone, wood, frame and fill, prefabricated panel) and points out that each of them has followed a logically transmitted evolution to contemporary construction. Kidder Smith's *Switzerland* has probably inherited more incredible architecture per square kilometre than any other country in the world. On the one hand the beginnings of the "New Architecture" seem to be influenced by France and Germany, but on the other hand Switzerland itself was contributor to new architecture when hosting the International Congress for Modern Architecture (CIAM) in 1928. The Swiss style invokes the consideration of scale based on the human and not the monumental scale. Moreover, Kidder Smith underlines the "Swiss dissatisfaction with sharp solids against a void - the harshness of the abrupt". In the matter of materials he considers concrete the most important structural element. In early modern buildings concrete was used inside and outside as solid concrete frames, floors and walls. But with the war starting in 1939 even concrete became scarce and they started to build concrete frames filled in with brick. It is important to say that Kidder Smith was a strong passionate of Le Corbusier's *beton brut* and ineffable space. When he was working on *Switzerland builds*, Giedion alerted him to the planned demolition of Ville Savoye. Kidder Smith went immediately to Poissy and took some pictures of the structure, dilapidated and full of hay, and all the windows broken. After the shooting he helped the preservation sending cablegrams to leading historians and architects around the world. Le Corbusier later gave him a dedicated lithograph -titled *Tilting at windmills-* as a "thank you"⁴.

The section of Swiss modern architecture is categorically divided into the different building types: multiple housing, private houses, churches, schools, hospitals, open air baths, public buildings and industrial architecture. The main ones have general forewords which attempt to give background information and comprehensive principles followed by examples with pictures. *Switzerland builds* is a very exhaustive and original work. Kidder Smith destroys the sham romantic aspect which has done so much harm to the understanding of Switzerland. With the following descriptions on Kidder Smith, we can only agree with Giedion when he writes: "He never succumbs to the picture-postcard cliché. His eyes are trained by modern architecture and painting. He perceives structures. He sees things in sun-light and he has a feeling for space. He sees anonymously, without pushing too much of his personality between us and the object"⁵.

italian temperament and evidence through the ages

It was the President's Fellowship from Brown University, which enabled Kidder Smith to move with his wife and their two sons to Rome and travel around Italy from 1950 to 1951. *Italy Builds* (1955) was the fruit of that time in Italy. Before the book was printed, on 28th April 1952, a crowded audience attended at the RIBA in London a lecture by Kidder Smith on "Contemporary Italian Architecture and the Italian Heritage". The addressees were "rewarded by a racy and informative talk and some 50 superb coloured pictures". An anonymous writer has left a very illuminating description of the event:

"This was one of those lectures which fill editors with despair because no printed report can convey to a reader its impact on the eye and mind of a member of the audience. Mr Kidder Smith's succinct and acute comments on each slide –sometimes no more than a word or two as an aside– provided vivid mental pictures which are impossible to reproduce in print. But more especially the coloured slides showing buildings which depend very much for their architectural effect on subtle shades in renderings and concrete finishes are quite beyond the resources of anything but the most expensive production"⁶.

Many of the themes discussed will appear later in the book. Kidder Smith explained how Italy is rumpled by hills and scattered by mountains. He also focused on climatic factors that characterize each region and influence different types of vernacular Italian architecture. He showed first slides of the older architecture and scenic background of Italian building, and then of some modern buildings.

Kidder Smith thought that *Italy builds* was his best book. It was described as a triumph because of the balance between photographs of older buildings and new buildings. Almost the first half of the book is devoted to seven different categories as examples: high mountain architecture; northern foot hill architecture; Dolomite types; plain lower Po valley architecture; central Appennini hills architecture, Naples bay coastal architecture, the trulli of Puglia. The second half of the book is an alternative vision of post-war reconstruction, creating the modern Italian townscape.

Architectural historian Joseph Rykwert (b.1926) criticises Kidder Smith's approach to photographing architecture for his over-dramatization of buildings. While he says that "Mr. Smith is technically absolutely superb", he takes issue with the photographer's glamorization of architecture and thinks that *Italy builds* optimistically misread the Italian situation. The designer Massimo Vignelli (1931-2014) was studying architecture in Italy in the 1950's and thought then of *Italy builds* as Rykwert does. But looking at *Italy builds* forty years after the publication he changed his mind. He says that Kidder Smith "had the kind of detachments to see much better". It is the architectural historian Vincent Scully (b.1920) who gives a very detailed review of the book in his article titled "Architecture and ancestor worship". He observes:

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"In Italy his eyes goes first to peasant architecture, to barns, farmhouses and massed villages in their landscape. Some beautiful photographs interpret these with the intense emotion of an age which feels itself out of touch with the basic nature of things. The eye is toward the primitive: the solid, earth-heavy shapes of masonry, the panels of brick-work, the skeletons of wood, the directly functional types, the solemn personifications of human qualities in the landscape. There develops a feeling for essential, not romantic, meaning. After this Kidder Smith with the best naiveté, rediscovers the beauty of the city streets and squares. Here he uses some plans from Sitte and others, but the photographs reveal his own sensitive and astonished eye. They constitute a valuable set of visual material for a study of how the twentieth century regards Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque squares. It shows an age which has been told in one way or another that the city was finished and which now, irrationally and rather magnificently, refuses to accept the fact. In these ways, and following its own needs, the present generation attempts to reconstitute the past for itself and for the future. When Kidder Smith turns to contemporary Italian architecture he has consequently developed standards of judgement. He finds it wanting in many respects but full of intense vitality in others. In his criticisms he occasionally matters, half apologetically, shibboleths derived from the fathers, but this is rare. For the most part the judgments are his own and are constructively sympathetic. He beautifully documents the work of the great engineer, Pier Luigi Nervi"⁷.



f4_The Upper Forum in Rome
1951, George Everard Kidder Smith

In Italy he found the ancient architecture fabulous. In his home on the Upper East Side of Manhattan he papered an entire living-room wall with a gigantic photographic print of the ruin of the Upper Forum in Rome. "There is no country in the world –as Kidder Smith proclaims in the preface of the book– where such a study of the old can be more profitably undertaken than Italy"⁸.

The introductory essay of the book, written by the architect Ernesto Nathan Rogers (1909-1969), is one of the most significant chapters and represents the key to the choice of works and their interpretation. Rogers, who at that time was professor at the Politecnico di Milano and director of the architectural magazine *Casabella*, fundamentally guided Kidder Smith during his photo journey. According to Kidder Smith the main object of admiration in Italy is the urban scene. He considers it "an aesthetic experience". He leads the reader into the well sculptured spaces by a series of special sequence photographs that interpret in two dimensions the three dimensions of the spaces. Each photograph bears a number and each page spread has a plan showing by numbered arrows the viewpoint and direction of the photographs.

new architectures of europe

Later, in the 1960s, Kidder Smith would travel through Europe to research *The New Architecture of Europe* (1961) and *The New Churches of Europe* (1964). He reveals another aspect of his fascination in his introduction to "New Architecture", describing how the advent of such technological innovations as rolled steel and reinforced concrete changed the way people build. In both the books he describes some of the most outstanding post-wars buildings of different European countries. He subdivides his book in chapters, one about almost each European country, which he arranges in alphabetically order. These chapters firstly include general information on each country and subsequently give some examples of different building types.



f5_The two book covers

for *The New Architecture of Europe* (1962) and the Italian edition *Guida all'architettura contemporanea* (1963) both by G.E. Kidder Smith

The New Architecture of Europe was published in many different editions. It became a Pelican pocket size book in 1962 and the year after appeared the Italian translation titled *Guida dell'architettura contemporanea in Europa*. Right at the beginning of the book, Kidder Smith explains its function, how it shall be seen and used and clarifies that it only reflects his personal view on modern architecture. He looks at social housing, schools and churches, because those were the building mostly required to be re-erected. Kidder Smith also points out, that there are different factors, which cause a new type of architecture: new inventions like rolled steel and reinforced concrete enabling novel building types. His criteria for choosing examples were their design and also whether a fresh and constructive thinking could be found. It is his subjective choice, which he underlines keenly.

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f6. Notre Dame de Royan

by Guillaume Gillet architect, 1958, G. E. Kidder Smith

Kidder Smith makes the reader aware of the huge architectural influence that he attributes to the British Isles. One of the projects mentioned is the Churchfields School near Birmingham by Richard Sheppard (1910-1982). According to the author the only outstanding architect in France is Le Corbusier. Describing Germany there is a big difference in quality of post-war architecture depending on the building type. Pier Luigi Nervi (1891-1979) is the dominant figure in the Italian architectural section. The Palazzetto dello Sport in Rome is one of the main buildings meticulously described by the photographer. In addition to that, the Housing for Olivetti workers by Marcello Nizzoli (1887-1969) and Annibale Focchi (1915-2011) becomes an important example of different units as a whole. Spanish contribution to modern movement and engineering is incarnated by Eduardo Torroja (1899-1961) with his Instituto Técnico de la Construcción y del Cemento. Kidder Smith devotes one of his best images to the architectural complex interpreting it like a group of abstract sculptures. When describing contemporary architecture in Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark he says that the contribution of these northern countries is like a bombshell. The extensive planning and urban rehabilitation of Vällingby, the industrial complex of Sunila Sulphate Cellulose Mill by Alvar Aalto (1898-1976), the light design of Munkergård School by Arne Jacobsen (1902-1971) are only few of the examples of the paladins of the modern movement. Kidder Smith points out that the architecturally sensational rarely appears in Scandinavia. He asserts: "Wherever one goes in Scandinavia one will find a relaxed pleasure in architecture, a delightful human scale –not bombastic, not self-important– and a very deep respect for nature and architecture together –not in completion, not via a triumphant bulldozer. This bespeaks an educated, mature approach to life and shelter"⁹.

The New Churches of Europe, in its bilingual edition (English-Spanish translated), is the last book devoted to European architecture. The author's intent is to build up a visual narrative for ecclesiastical architecture. The images of sixty churches are spread over two hundred and eighty pages of glossy paper. They were selected because they constitute in Kidder Smith's opinion the most stimulating ecclesiastic workshop of our time establishing new horizons in church thinking. The churches are grouped by country (alphabetically in English), then by architect and then chronologically. Kidder Smith nominates as "the greatest building of our time" Le Corbusier's Notre-Dame du Haut in Ronchamp. He precisely underlines that the church leaves the spectator "stunned by the strangeness, the carefully orchestrated strangeness of a great facade". Kidder Smith describes the interior as a place, that "carries a religious conviction and creates a religious atmosphere of the highest order"¹⁰, because of its plastic flowing shape and the different coloured, deeply into the wall placed windows. This is more than evident in many pictures taken. All photographs are directly proportional to the page size and have the same ratio whether large or small. The visual apparatus of the entire book is an incredible intellectual challenge. The image sequencing, the few text accompanying the black and white photographs and the clean architectural drawings combined all together make *The New Churches of Europe* a magnificently powerful and coherent object.

conclusion

What impact do all these illustrated books have on our understanding of European architecture? Without question, George Everard Kidder Smith has established in greater detail the social and architectural arenas –both domestic and international– in which European architects matured and in which they worked. These publications offer large information regarding the view of European architects' work as poised between internationalism and local building tradition. We see Kidder Smith's visual and written approach as never succumbing completely to the modernist voice or to the lure of banal industrialized standardization; instead he always retains a concern for the genius loci and its inhabitants. In one of his last interviews he declared: "Being in Europe and encountering architecture –real architecture– for the first time, my taste buds were perked and so I kept going at it"¹¹. Without question the visual transmission of his architectural photography enriches our knowledge. His extraordinary legacy remains for the coming generations in order "to really see" buildings.

endnotes

1. Markelius was the City Planner of Stockholm and foremost authority on Swedish land policy and planning. He wrote the introductory land usage chapter.
2. Siegfried Giedion, "Switzerland or the forming of an idea", in Kidder Smith, G. Everard. *Switzerland Builds. Its native and modern architecture*. (London: Architectural Press; New York & Stockholm: Albert Bonnier, 1950), 11.
3. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, "Inaugural Address as Director of Architecture at Armour Institute of Technology", in Johnson Philip, *Mies van der Rohe* (New York: MoMA, 1947), 192.
4. For this see a letter to the Editor by Kidder Smith in the *Journal of the Society of the Architectural Historians*, 52 (1993): 511.
5. Siegfried Giedion, *Switzerland Builds*, op.cit. 11.
6. Anonymous reporter, "Mr. Kidder Smith's Lecture", *RIBA Journal*, 7 (1952): 234.
7. Vincent Scully, "Architecture and ancestor worship", *Art News*, 10 (1956): 57.
8. George Everard Kidder Smith, *Italia Costruisce. Sua architettura moderna e sua eredità indigena*. (Milano: Edizioni di Comunità, 1955) 15.

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9. George Everard Kidder Smith, *The New Churches of Europe*. (London: Penguin, 1962) 195.
10. George Everard Kidder Smith, *The New Architecture of Europe*. (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1964) 90.
11. Thomas D. Sullivan, "Architecture with a snap: Photographer G.E.Kidder Smith has travelled the world to help people 'see' buildings", *Insight on the News*, 23 (1996): 34.

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CV

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